



# Education and Local Government Interim Committee

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## 58th Montana Legislature

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The Montana Association of Planners surveyed its members recently on the specific issue of a pre-application process for applications for major and minor subdivision proposals. Five questions were asked. The following is a compilation of those surveys that were returned.

**1. Does your city or county have a pre-application process for subdivision applications (major and minor)?**

The overwhelming majority of those who responded said yes to this question. One survey stated that for a minor subdivision, the applicant has the option of submitting a pre-application or having a pre-submittal meeting. For a major subdivision, a pre-application is required and a pre-submittal meeting is strongly recommended.

**2. If you have a pre-application process, is a pre-application meeting required prior to subdivision application submittal?**

A majority of those who responded said yes to this question. Those who said a pre-application meeting was not required also said that applicants were strongly encouraged to request such a meeting or to at least meet with all appropriate departments prior to submitting an application.

**3. How does the pre-application process work?**

According to the survey responses, the purpose of the pre-application meeting is to lay out the approval process and the requirements for approval of an application, develop a time line, answer applicant questions, and identify preliminary problems that will need to be corrected before the final application is submitted.

Most jurisdictions hold the meetings at times requested by the applicant. One jurisdiction holds pre-application meetings twice a week at a set time. Another jurisdiction holds the pre-application meeting on the site of the project.

The pre-application meeting often involves the applicant, the applicant's

professionals (surveyors, engineers, etc.), planning staff, and staff of other departments (fire, road, health, etc.). The applicant is required to submit some sort of preliminary plan that can range from a simple sketch to a more detailed explanation of the project. The preliminary plan is reviewed, questions are asked, and recommendations are made. Some jurisdictions have a prepared checklist that they fill out and then give to the applicant. Other jurisdictions supply the applicants with the notes on the issues discussed at the meeting.

One jurisdiction requires one pre-application meeting for simple projects and two pre-application meetings for more complex projects.

For those jurisdictions that do not require a pre-application meeting, a preliminary proposal is submitted to the planning department. Planning staff then reviews the proposal and sends its review and comments to the applicant.

**4. Do you think your pre-application process helps reduce the length of time it takes for an application to make its way through subdivision review?**

An overwhelming majority answered yes to this question. The pre-application process saves time once the formal review process begins because issues that would delay formal approval have already been identified and addressed. A pre-application process can also help the planning board make a decision at the time the public hearing on the application is held, rather than delay the decision until the next meeting.

While some planning staffs said that the pre-application process does not necessarily reduce the length of time for final approval because they have to work through the issues at some point, the pre-application process does save developers' time and money by identifying major issues prior to submission of an application.

One planner commented that a pre-application process is a waste of time for simple projects offered by developers who are well acquainted with the approval process.

**5. Do you think that the pre-application process saved staff time?**

Again, an overwhelming majority answered yes. Staff spends less time reviewing applications, drafting letters, explaining deficiencies, making phone calls, and counseling applicants on how to prepare applications correctly. A pre-application process results in the submission of more complete applications and in a better

understanding of the process by applicants. A pre-application process also saves time for the planning board and the governing body with final approval authority.

One planner commented that the greatest saving is in better projects, fewer delays at the approval level, fewer requests for variances, and fewer confrontational meetings.

The pre-application process also saves applicants' time and money because it is less costly to make changes early in the process before considerable resources are committed. Also, applicants do not waste their efforts on projects that cannot be approved or have poor functionality.

One planner commented that a first look at a proposal when submitted for review is no different than a first look at a pre-application meeting. If there are problems, they need to be addressed before an application is accepted. In most cases, not having a pre-application meeting is less time-consuming on staff than on an applicant. Another planner commented that a pre-application process results in the same amount of staff time because problems have to be identified at some point in the process.

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